



SURVIVING WAR AND TRANSITION

PERSPECTIVES FROM AFGHAN WOMEN



WOMEN'S REGIONAL NETWORK
AFGHANISTAN • PAKISTAN • INDIA

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are many women and men who have shared their thoughts and passion on making the future better for all Afghans with the members of the Network.

However, without the active and enthusiastic support and collaboration of the women who tell their stories and share their dreams, there would be no story to tell. We thank the courageous women of Afghanistan who continue to rise in spite of the daily struggles that try to stop them. We also want to thank Equality for Peace and Democracy for cooperating to work in a volatile environment to raise the voices of the women which have never been heard.

A special thanks for the consistent financial support of Cynda Collins Arsenault of Superior, CO, Jane Hays of Denver, CO, Katrin Wilde and Elaine Nonneman of the Channel Foundation in Seattle, Washington and to Mama Cash in The Netherlands for taking the risk and sharing this journey with us.

—The members of the Women's Regional Network

CREDITS:

Design by Kirsten Ankers, Citrine Sky Design

SURVIVING WAR AND TRANSITION

PERSPECTIVES FROM AFGHAN WOMEN

Women's Regional Network, WRN 2013





Climbing to the top, Kabul.
Photo Credit: Beth Wald

TABLE OF CONTENTS

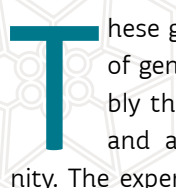
Executive Summary	5
Introduction	9
Background	13
Scope and Methodology	15
Setting The Context:perspectives from Afghan Women	
Linkages Between Security, Corruption, the Militarization of Aid	19
A) Afghan Women’s Perceptions of Security	20
B) Afghan Women’s Perceptions Of Corruption	24
C) Afghan Women’s Perceptions of the Militarization of Aid.....	26
Key Findings and Policy Recommendations	29
Conclusion	33
Appendices.....	34



Herat, Afghanistan. Photo Credit: Beth Wald

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the past decade Afghan women have made significant measureable gains: 40% of children attending schools are girls, women comprise 27% of the current parliament and 20% of provincial councils. Women are working with various government agencies, including the judiciary and executive branches of the government. Women are also working as journalists, civil society and human rights activists, lawyers and entrepreneurs throughout the country.



These gains have been made largely as a result of gender-sensitive laws, legislation and notably the Afghan Constitution with the support and attention of the international community. The experience of Afghan women since 2001 has enabled them to interact with the global community and many acknowledge today that they have become more aware of their rights and are now more vociferous in demanding them. However, with the current peace and transition processes in Afghanistan, especially as talks regarding negotiations with insurgents are increasing, women are concerned about their status, future and protecting the gains made in the last decade.

In 2011 a small group of women's rights activists from Afghanistan, India and Pakistan convened and established the Women's Regional Network (WRN) to join efforts in peace and security initiatives both at the national and regional levels. All of the members unanimously agreed to begin their activities on the ground in each of their respective country through holding "Community Conversations." These conversations were held in different zones of each country across the region and the main purpose of the conversations was to document women's voices on three specific issues that the Network agreed upon in their initial meeting: security, corruption and militarization and effectiveness of aid

and development. The outcome of the Community Conversations process has two components. The first is a series of regional and country reports based on conversations about security, corruption, militarization and effectiveness of aid with women from different walks of

ABBREVIATIONS:

AIHRC:	Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission
ANA:	Afghan National Army
ANP:	Afghan National Police
ALP:	Afghan Local Police
ANSF:	Afghan National Security Forces
ARC:	Afghan Red Crescent
EPD:	EQUALITY for Peace and Democracy (NGO)
EVAW:	Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW)
FGD:	Focus Group Discussion
GDP:	Gross Domestic Product
HPC:	High Peace Council
ISAF:	International Security Assistance Force
KII:	Key Informant Interviews
PRT:	Provincial Reconstruction Teams
WRN:	Women's Regional Network



WRN Member Rangina Hamidi and the women artisans of Kandahar Treasure an organisation supporting local women's livelihoods.
Photo Credit: Rangina Hamidi Kandahar Treasure.

life in each of the three countries. The second, taking these reports as a starting point, WRN members will initiate conversations outside conventional security circles regarding the same issues as a way of catalyzing more and more women to think and speak up on the issues that affect their daily lives. WRN members in each country interpreted and adapted the process to suit the local context and working conditions, resulting in contextually relevant, empirically rich and authentically diverse reports. Giving a voice to women was a priority and this is reflected in the extensive use of interlocutors' own words in all the WRN reports from the Community Conversations.

In Afghanistan, WRN members visualized a dialogue-based research process. They partnered with EQUALITY for Peace and Democracy (EPD), an Afghan NGO, who served as the fiscal and implementing agent for the WRN grant from Mama Cash, which provided the essential financial support for these conversations in all three countries. A total of 40 Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were organized, each featuring between four and six participants, five in each of the eight targeted provinces of Afghanistan. In other words, the Afghanistan Community Conversations engaged around 160 women, including high school and university students, teachers, health care workers, civil society activists, government workers and homemakers in the Focused Group Discussions (FGDs). The findings from the Focus Group Discussions were supplemented by Key Informant Interviews of women's rights activists from the target provinces.

The gap between the reality of women's lives and government commitments can be attributed to insecurity, corruption and the use of international aid as an instru-

ment of foreign policy—all of which are consequences of conflict.

Women's concerns on security constitute the majority of findings of this research. In other words, security was the main concern expressed by all women during community conversations. Far from women's rights making progress, insecurity was a likely cause of their decline. How safe women felt depended on where they were living; women in south of the country felt the least safe in comparison with women in north who felt safer and women in urban areas who felt the safest.

While home is an Afghan woman's last refuge, women also spoke about domestic violence including forced marriages, honor killings, dispute settlements through exchange of girls and women and forced confinement to the home. They believe patriarchy and tradition are responsible for such discrimination and violence as much as the conflict conditions that prevail.

Furthermore, in the public sphere, Afghan Local Police (ALP) and other armed groups empowered by the government as well as non-state militias are the most common perpetrators of sexual violence. Women were divided on whether Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) or foreign forces inspired more confidence. Deteriorating security is having long-term consequences for the life-chances of Afghan girls and women, decreasing mobility and access to health and education. When the extremity of the violence and insecurity increases, it strengthens the arguments of conservatives who would limit women's freedom and their participation in societal affairs, which is reinforced by absence of rule of law, endemic corruption and a culture of impunity.

Corruption is seen as all pervasive, and women make a clear link between insecurity and corruption. Furthermore, corruption arises from weak governance, which results in people's loss of faith in the government and hope for change. Anecdote after anecdote reinforced the idea that corruption was unavoidable and that in addition to monetary bribes, women were often forced into sexual favors as bribes. Women believe that all conflict parties use corruption and the culture of impunity to increase their advantages in a given position.

Women also highlighted the fact that a substantial part of international aid that is pledged for Afghanistan's reconstruction and development actually never makes it to Afghanistan through imports, contractors and consultancies.

While women appreciate efforts made by the international forces to provide basic services to people as part of their "hearts and minds" campaign, they believe militarization of aid diminishes space for the rule of law and good governance, creating new opportunities for corruption and insecurity.

Most of the donor countries have preferred to direct their assistance through their military forces in Afghanistan rather than working through Afghan institutions. This has created parallel development universes, one far less accountable than the other. What has been more disheartening for Afghan women is that the newly built facilities like schools, hospitals and roads constructed by military forces are vulnerable to attack by anti-western militia groups. While women appreciate efforts made by the international forces to provide basic services to people as part of their "hearts and minds" campaign, they believe militarization of aid diminishes space for the rule of law and good governance, creating new opportunities for corruption and insecurity.

Women in Afghanistan are living with extreme levels of violence in both the private and public spheres. There is a large gender gap, but insecurity, corruption and militarization seem to preclude any change in this situation. There is cynicism about the prospects of peace through-

out the country. Nevertheless, Afghan women believe in the importance of asserting and expanding their agency—as an active part of civil society and also by expanding women's participation in the peace process.

Afghan women recommend that the Afghan government should commit to women's rights as non-negotiable in the peace process. They also recommend that the Afghan government should ensure women's meaningful and full participation at the negotiation table, decision-making and within state affairs in line with the Afghan constitution. They also recommended that the government should refrain from supporting any law or legislation detrimental to women's rights, which violates the Afghan constitution and any pertinent international obligations and commitments. The Afghan government needs to build its capacity to hold accountable the justice and security sectors for the protection and prevention of violence and abuse of women and girls.

The women-focused organizations should cooperate with each other and coordinate their efforts related to women's rights. These organizations should promote women leaders as role models for both women's rights and building professional opportunities for women. Enhancing Afghan women's professional capacity and confidence to work beyond gendered roles in male-dominated sectors like the economy, security and judiciary would greatly aid the women's movement in Afghanistan. Women's organizations should also design and implement long-term projects for women's empowerment rather than short-term projects with a limited focus and vision.

They recommend that the international community should make all of its support to the Afghan government conditional on women's rights as a non-negotiable part of any dialogue on peace. Afghan women expect the international community to continue to assist the government of Afghanistan in implementing its commitments to gender equality policies and laws, and in particular, the organs of the Elimination of Violence Against Women Bill (EVAW). The Afghan women should be driving the agenda for gender equality and women's empowerment; taking the lead in defining their legal, political and social concerns and priorities, both during the transition process and beyond.



WRN Steering Committee meeting Kabul, April 2013
Photo Credit: Kalpana Biswas

INTRODUCTION

Violence against women is all pervasive. Placed on the wrong side of power and hierarchies, women globally have faced inter-personal as well as structural violence. However, the depth and dimensions of the issue are monumental in Afghanistan. The “Black period” of the Taliban era eroded any notion of equality, equal opportunity and dignity of life for Afghan women.



Since 2001 much effort has been given to improving the situation of women and girls in Afghanistan and there are some great and noticeable examples of success throughout the country. Currently there are 68 women members in the Parliament’s lower house, 28 women senators in the upper house, three women ministers, a woman mayor, a woman director of Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), a woman director of the Afghan Red Crescent (ARC) and nine women members of the High Peace Council (HPC). Today women have a significant presence in all sectors including civil society, private sector, media, arts and culture. According to World Bank data “6,300 women joined savings groups with access to loans between 2010 and 2013; nearly 60 percent of the new enterprise groups are made up of women with access to technical support for rural development projects. 2.7 million girls were enrolled in schools in 2012, up from 191,000 in 2002. 74 percent of health care facilities had at least one female staff member in 2012, up from 54 percent in 2004; the number of health care facilities increased from 496 to 2,047; some 20,000 community health workers — half of them women—have been trained

and deployed throughout Afghanistan, increasing access to family planning and boosting childhood vaccinations. 43 percent of births were facility-based in 2012, up from 7 percent in 2004; prenatal coverage was 39 percent, up from 6 percent in 2003.”¹

In spite of the changes women have witnessed and participated in during the past decade, these successes are only a small step on the road to empowerment. Much more work is needed to enhance women’s position in Afghanistan which has to be much more efficient and effective to help Afghan women. Afghanistan remains a country with the highest infant and maternal mortality rates in the world.²

A national survey conducted in 2008 found that 87% of women had been subject to some form of violence in their lives, domestic abuse, rape, forced marriages, exchanges of girls to settle disputes and honor murders.”³ Between March 12 and October 12, 2012, the AIHRC documented more than 4000 cases of violence against women. This represented a rise of 28% compared to the same period in 2011. However, the actual numbers of incidents were likely far higher, as women who report

1 http://www.worldbank.org/ida/ida_abcs_gender.html

2 Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU). *Women’s Rights and Transition. Securing Gains, Moving Forward*. Forthcoming, 2013. Pg. 35



WRN Members in Kabul, 2013.
Photo Credit Kilpana Biswas

such violence still risk reprisal and being stigmatized by their communities.”⁴ What this illustrates is an increase in violence against women in Afghanistan, as well as an increase in the reporting of such cases, as women feel secure to report them and also find necessary support to fight such cases.

In such a context, the process of political change and the transition in security apparatus presents a major challenge, which will directly impact women.

2014 is an indicative year for Afghanistan. Not only will the Presidential elections take place, but the international community will also withdraw their military missions from the country; transferring full and complete responsibility of security to the ANSF. In an effort to ‘stabilize’ the country in the intervening decade, the international community put together one of the largest international interventions in history: at its peak, “there were more than 130,000 foreign troops in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the country had become the single largest recipient of official development assistance in the world.”⁵ Yet, ISAF hands over to their Afghan colleagues a country that

is much less secure and more corrupt than when foreign military intervention began in the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001. While billions of dollars in assistance and support have poured into Afghanistan since that time, much of it has been delivered through military forces, in effect militarizing aid.

According to a recent World Bank report, international assistance to Afghanistan is approximately six billion dollars a year, which represents nearly 40% of the country’s Gross Domestic Product, (GDP).⁶ While it has been credited with much of Afghanistan’s “progress since 2001, including infrastructure and government administration, it has also been linked to corruption, fragmented and parallel delivery systems, poor aid effectiveness, and weakened governance.”⁷ This destabilizing impact of aid will only continue to grow during the transition period.⁸

Simultaneously, the opening of the Taliban’s diplomatic office in Qatar as a staging ground for peace talks with the US is not marking the end of the war in Afghanistan but another phase of conflict for Afghanistan. For the women of Afghanistan this turn of events represents

3 Ibid. Pg. 51

4 Statement from: Women Living Under Muslim Laws and our Afghan partners in response to the opening of the first Taliban office in Qatar, and the ongoing “peace” negotiations with international leaders. June 2013. <http://www.wluml.org/media/us-taliban-talks-accountability-human-rights-and-justice-central-enduring-peace>

5 Paris, Roland. *Afghanistan: What went Wrong. Perspectives on Politics*. Cambridge University. Vol. 11, Issue 2/ 2013. Pg. 538.

6 The World Bank. *Afghanistan in Transition: Looking Beyond 2014*. Vol. 1: Overview. May 2012. Pg.1.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid. Pp. 2/3

just the latest blow in their efforts to secure an equal place in the country in the aftermath of the gender-apartheid regime of the Taliban.

More than ten years after the international intervention with its promises of ‘liberation’ Afghan women now find themselves in an extremely precarious place, much of it due to the impact of heightened insecurity, endemic corruption and the militarization and effectiveness of aid.

Through the voices of women from across Afghanistan, gathered through the exercise of Community Conversations, this report will highlight how and why this is so. It is also important to note, this is the first time women’s collective view on security, corruption, militarization and aid effectiveness have been documented and presented in a report. This report is the first of its kind.

GENDER STATISTICS: HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE 2012 WORLD DEVELOPMENT REPORT

INDICATORS	Afghanistan	Pakistan	India
Adolescent fertility rate (birth per 1000 women ages 15-19)	93	28	36.4
Account at a formal institution (female, % age 15+)	2.6	3	26.5
Age at first marriage, female	21.5 (2010)
Contraceptive prevalence	21.2	27 (2008)	54.8 (2008)
Female headed households (% of households with a female head)	..	10.4 (2007)	..
Female legislators, senior officials and managers (% of total)	..	3 (2008)	13.10 (2010)
Fertility rate, total (births per woman)	5.4	2.5	3.3
Improved sanitation facilities (% of population)	28.5	47.4	35.1
Labour force participation (female, % of total labour force)	15.8	20.8	25.4
Labour force participation rate (female, % of female population ages 15-64)	16.1	23.4	30.3
Life expectancy at birth, female (years)	61.4	67.2	67.7
Lifetime risk of maternal death (1: rate varies by country)
Literacy rate, youth female (% of female ages 15-24)	..	61.5 (2009)	..
Literacy rate, adult female (% of female ages 15 and above)	..	40.3 (2009)	..
Maternal mortality ratio (modeled estimate, per 100,000 live births)	460 (2010)	260 (2010)	200 (2010)
Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments (%)	27.7	22.5	11
Proportion of women in ministerial positions (%)	7.4 (2010)	7.5 (2010)	10 (2010)
Women who were first married by age 18 (% of women ages 18-24)	40.4	24 (2007)	..

Accessed at World Bank, *Gender Equality Data and Statistics*, <http://datatopics.worldbank.org/gender/thematic-data> on October 24, 2013.



Kandahar, Afghanistan Election workers wait for voters at a polling station during parliamentary elections. Photo Credit: REUTERS/Omar Sobhani

BACKGROUND

Founded in 2011, the Women's Regional Network (WRN) is a network of individual women civil society leaders from Afghanistan, India and Pakistan working together to strengthen women's rights to ensure peace and security in the region.



WRN is animated by a vision of women working collaboratively within and across borders, to listen to and learn from each other to construct a common agenda towards equitable and sustainable development with full participation of women in building a just society. At its launch, members of the network identified interlinked areas of concern—militarization, extremisms, corruption and lack of security—as a priority for all three countries. WRN members in Afghanistan, India and Pakistan are autonomous but work in close coordination with each other. Members in each country have invited others to join and establish working relations with individuals and organizations working for women's rights in their respective countries.

The initiative started on the premise that the three countries share a similar history of struggle with decades of intra-state conflicts, the roots and consequences of which intricately connect the politics of the three countries. The role of the WRN is facilitative: to assist communities of women to share their successes, learn from each other's challenges, construct common agendas across borders, and pursue ways to collaborate and advance common goals and values to bring stability and equitable economic growth to the region.

The WRN is especially concerned with the inter-linkages between security and extremism and corruption, including the militarization and effectiveness of aid and development as they impact women's lives. As such, the network focuses its activities on the strengthening of

democratic values to ensure women's political and economic participation is non-negotiable in the struggle towards peace and justice.

In order to facilitate and inform the work that the WRN will be initiating, the idea of a qualitative research project focusing on women's perceptions on security, corruption and the militarization and effectiveness of aid was developed.

In Afghanistan, WRN partnered with EQUALITY for Peace and Democracy (EPD) to undertake the qualitative research to assess security, corruption and militarization and effectiveness of aid from the perspective of Afghan women. The community conversations were conducted in eight provinces of Afghanistan with women from various backgrounds. EPD conducted the primary research and provided the technical support for the research.

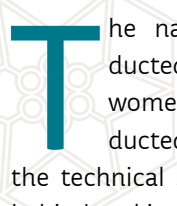
The resulting report is designed to contribute to the growing body of research on gender issues in Afghanistan. It particularly highlights and brings to the forefront views of women across Afghanistan and not just from Kabul. The aim of this exercise was also to provide a forum to Afghan women around the country, mainly from provinces, to be heard. These ground views were the basis of the actionable recommendations, which will be developed as advocacy tools to lobby for the increase in participation of women in policy and decision-making. Women's inclusion is particularly important in the lead up to the 2014 transition period and the final withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan.



An Afghan women walks inside a police compound,
Herat Province. Photo Credit: REUTERS/Mohmmad Shoib

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

The aim of this research is to analyze perspectives of women on security, corruption and militarization and effectiveness of aid. As previously noted, the premise is not only to capture the views of women, but also to highlight how these issues affect their lives in the most fundamental ways. To ensure a holistic representation, the research was conducted in eight provinces across Afghanistan.



The national dialogue/assessment was conducted in eight provinces of Afghanistan with women from various backgrounds. EPD conducted the primary research as well as provided the technical support for the research. The rationale behind making a more inclusive effort to reach women throughout the country was to fill the void of real grounded voices of Afghan women. Many reports about Afghan women represent select voices of women in the urban and more stable provinces. Often the views and opinions of civil society leaders, activists and women in Kabul are cited. The ordinary Afghan woman who may be raising 8 school-going children, or a teacher who has had to risk her life daily going to teach, or a young bride who recently married and must worry about the safety of her groom — these women's voices have never been sought. This research scope focused on the provincial women's perspectives, both from urban and rural areas to share their opinions on issues key to their security and well-being—security, corruption, militarization and effectiveness of aid and development.

The research also helped us develop actionable recommendations. These recommendations will be the basis of the Network's advocacy, especially as the Network pushes for more inclusive participation of women in policy and decision-making.

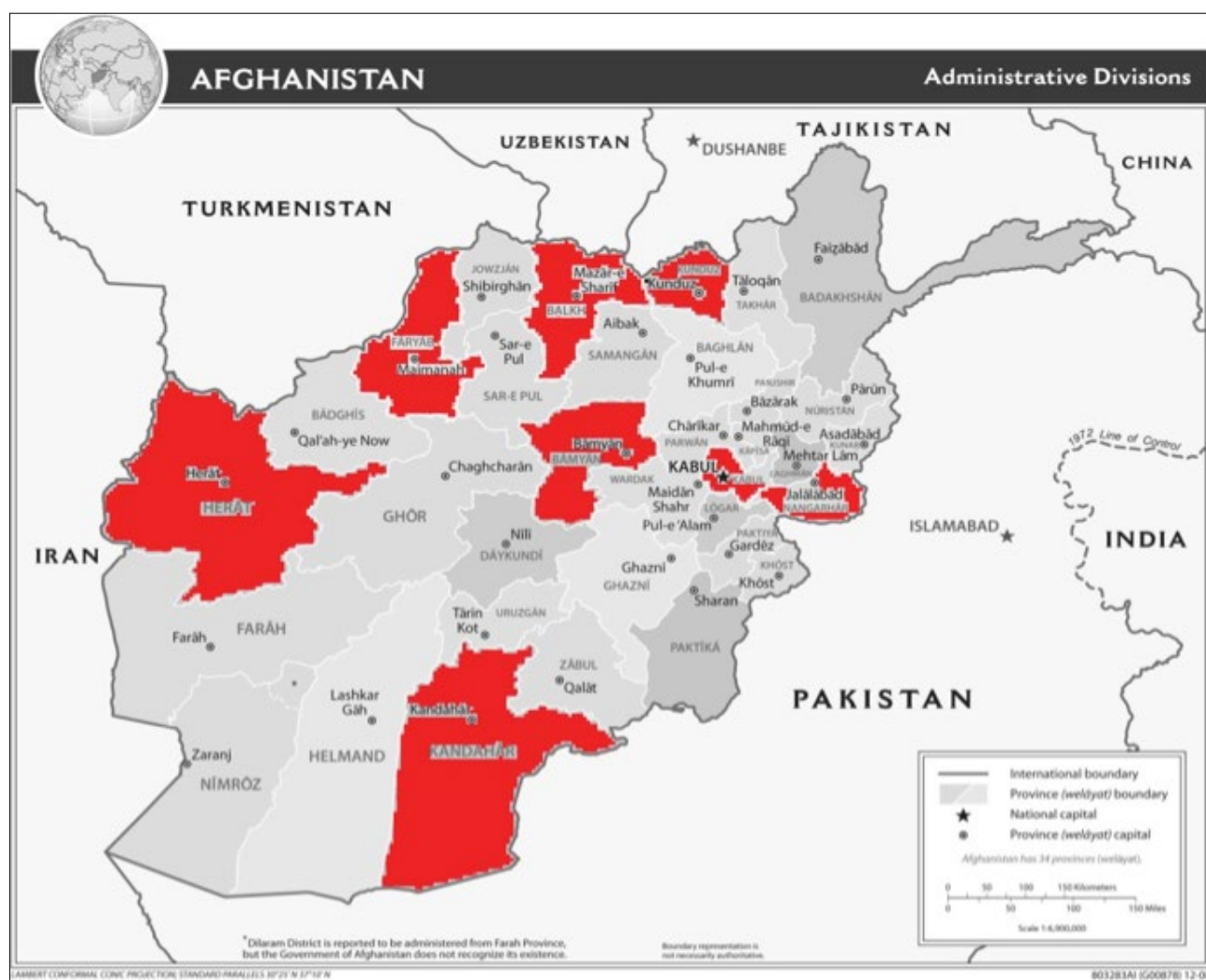
The report examines two themes in particular:

- > Causes and factors affecting women's lives;
- > Recommendations and action plans to be used as advocacy tools for increasing participation of women and including their concerns in policy-making and decisions around peace, good governance and social development.

This research was conducted using FGDs and KIIs to gather information for the specific questions designed. Furthermore, these tools were used to understand what challenges women face in the light of insecure environments, pervasive corruption, militarization and effectiveness of aid and development in their communities. The research team also conducted a literature survey of existing material to formulate a better understanding of the issues.

For the basis of the structured FGD, a questionnaire was developed through a number of consultation meetings with members of Afghan civil society as well as members of the parliament which focused on three key areas:

1. How the lack of security impacts women's daily lives;
2. How corruption impacts women's lives;
3. What are women's perspectives on the militarization and effectiveness of aid in Afghanistan?



The report's findings draws on insights gained from these structured FGDs and KIIs in eight provinces: Kabul, Balkh, Bamyan, Faryab, Herat, Kandahar, Nangarhar and Kunduz. These provinces have varying levels of stability and thus represent women's voices across the security spectrum of the country – from less affected areas to extremely unstable areas. This cross-section of the provinces also represents the major ethnic groups that comprise the country as an important factor in studying women's perspectives. These provinces are in the four regions of the country that also have region-specific concerns and issues. Overall, these areas are broadly indicative of the impact of the specified issues on women's lives and challenges faced nation-wide.

Five separate FGDs were conducted in each of the selected eight provinces. These discussions were held in local languages – Dari and Pashto. They were recorded, documented, transcribed and translated by

EPD researchers specifically for this report. A typical group had four to five participants and included women and girls from different backgrounds – high school and university students, teachers, health care workers, civil society activists, government workers and housewives. Literate and illiterate as well as urban and rural women were represented in the groups. FGD participants were women with characteristics of the overall population and they therefore make the research richer and more inclusive.

Primary data was also gathered through KIIs. The interviewees were seen as holding particular insights and expertise in the three areas of focus as they relate to women. Interviewees included members of the Provincial Peace Committees, staff of the provincial offices of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission and the Department of Women's Affairs, as well as provincial elected representatives. An average of four

Photo Credit: Equality for Peace and Democracy



Now we have a democratic government, the people are free to talk
but the insecurity takes away all these rights from the people.

—Health care worker, Kandahar province

KIIs were conducted in each of the eight provinces. To add depth and richness to this research we intentionally focused on women from provinces other than Kabul to make sure that their views are documented and highlighted as most of the existing literature on such subjects often equates the views of women in Kabul as views of women in Afghanistan.

The report also drew on secondary data, including reports and policy papers by both local and international organizations pertaining to the subject matter as well as to Afghan women and girls' experiences of the evolution and development of the country over the past decade and the engagement of the international community in this process.

However, it is important to note that there is a dearth of literature/research on the impact of corruption on women's lives, and even less on the impact of militarization and effectiveness of aid and development on

women's lives. In order to address this gap, the global office of the WRN commissioned an annotated bibliography to map recent studies, reports and other materials on these topics. The bibliography provided an initial baseline that enabled the WRN members and partners to become familiar with the current discourse and evidence related to these themes. It is hoped that the bibliography will inspire new thinking, enliven regional debates, and enrich and inform the network's members' long term strategic planning. It is meant to be a working document that can continuously be expanded upon to serve its members and partners.

Lastly, translated quotes from various participants have been used throughout this report in order to draw the parallels between individual experiences and broader patterns within the three focus areas and the links between them. To protect their identities their names have been withheld and only a description has been provided.



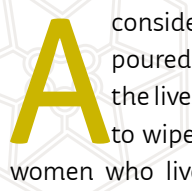
Community Conversation, Faryab Province.
Photo Credit: Huma Safi



SETTING THE CONTEXT: PERSPECTIVES FROM AFGHAN WOMEN ON SECURITY, CORRUPTION & MILITARIZATION AND EFFECTIVENESS OF AID

There is a direct link between the militarization and effectiveness (of aid), security and corruption. If the number of armed men increases in society, security decreases; and if society becomes more unstable, corruption increases. It's like our body — when our bodies become weak, every kind of virus or disease can attack our bodies easily.

—Health care worker, Kabul province



A considerable amount of the assistance that poured into the country went into improving the lives of women in Afghanistan in an attempt to wipe out the scars of the “black period”, as women who lived through the Taliban regime call it. There has been no shortage of ‘gender equality’ focused initiatives as donors and contractors have fallen over each other to support women’s empowerment in the country. From the redrafting of laws to heralding education initiatives for girls to training and capacity-building for women working in various sectors, millions of dollars of aid to support Afghan women has been provided as part of the broader state building project.

There have been some notable achievements, thanks in no small part to the advocacy efforts of Afghan women activists. These include the adoption of the national Constitution in 2004 guaranteeing gender equality, and the results of the 2010 elections, which gave Afghan women a larger percentage in both houses of Parliament than is Constitutionally required.

Yet, much of this push for gender equality remains both contested and fragile. As a health care worker from Kandahar put it,

“On paper we have very good and beneficial laws but often they don’t work in reality.”

Ultimately, Afghan women and girls have little to show for a decade’s worth of international intervention. In many places in the country, progress has been noted more for its backslide than for its march forward. Afghan women continue to struggle to hold on to the advances they have achieved against a backdrop of deteriorating security conditions, insecurity, widespread corruption and the increasing involvement of the military, making the task quite challenging.

The personal stories, which were shared by various participants, give an insight into the hardships and struggles

⁹ Twenty-eight percent in the lower house and twenty-seven percent in the upper house although Constitutional quotas only guarantee twenty-five percent and seventeen percent respectively.

which the Afghan women face. The everyday struggle is harrowingly brought to life in the following experience:

“A few days ago a husband brought his wife to the hospital. She was in a bad condition and needed blood. We asked her husband to arrange blood for his wife. He told us, ‘let her die. I will take another wife’, and she eventually died.”—Doctor, Kabul province

The anecdote above illustrates the huge gap between the reality on ground and what is written on paper. This gap can be attributed in large part to the consequences of the conflict, including increased insecurity, rampant corruption and the use of aid as an instrument of international foreign and security policy; all of which impact the ability of Afghan women and girls to fully participate in their society. An NGO worker from Faryab province summed it up:

“Problems with peace, security and corruption - these matters have a negative impact on women’s daily life, on their normal activities. It leads women being less active in society.”

The following sections will illustrate in detail how the issues of insecurity, corruption and the militarization and effectiveness of aid have impacted women’s lives in Afghanistan.

A) AFGHAN WOMEN’S PERCEPTIONS OF SECURITY

“Though we have a democratic government, the people are free to talk; the insecurity takes away all these rights from the people.”—Health care worker, Kandahar province

The growing insecurity in the country is having a significant impact on women’s ability to exercise their rights that are laid out in the 2004 Constitution as well as in domestic laws and the various international treaties to which the government is a signatory.

Hardly surprising that a 2011 Thomson Reuters’ poll conducted with gender experts from around the world determined that Afghanistan was the world’s most dangerous country to be female. They cited the current security situation as well as cultural practices as the reason why Afghanistan came ahead of such conflict-ridden places as the Congo and Somalia.¹⁰

The various FGDs looked at issues of security from a woman’s perspective. The discussion tried to move beyond the first layer of — “How do you understand security?” and tried to deepen the discussion to a more nuanced level. The various discussions including asking women questions such as — “who amongst women feel more secure- literate or illiterate women; urban or rural women?”. The researchers also tried to understand what strategies women have developed to cope with insecurities and finally participants were invited to share personal stories of violence to understand the depth of the problem.

From Mazar-i-Sharif in the north to Kandahar in the south and from Herat in the west to Jalalabad in the east, it is clear that security is a major, if not everyday, concern in the lives of Afghan women. In both the FGDs and KIIs conducted for this report, women across the country have authenticated what the Reuters poll indicated.

“How can one feel secure when every day we hear from the news that someone has been kidnapped or killed? Whenever a family member leaves the house we are worried for their security and whether they will return or not. How can a person feel secure and live normally in situation like this. A few days back (there was) a suicide attack on Nangarhar airport so how can home, office and school be a safe place [if they can attack a building that is so heavily guarded].” —Housewife, Nangarhar province

The sense of personal security women feel ranges depending on where they are positioned geographically. Women from Kandahar felt the least safe, whereas women from Bamyan felt the safest. Women from Nangarhar and Kunduz felt comparatively safer than women in Kandahar, but less safe than women in Bamyan. However, regardless of these regional variations, Afghan women feel vulnerable in the face of the conflict that continues to engulf the country. For example, a university student in Bamyan

¹⁰ Trust Law: <http://www.trust.org/trustlaw/news/trustlaw-poll-afghanistan-is-most-dangerous-country-for-women> (accessed 20 March 2013).

Girls at the Kuchi School in the Char Asiab Valley in Kabul Province.
Photo Credit: Ellen Jaskol



acknowledged that while she felt “one hundred percent” safe in her province, she felt vulnerable every time she had to travel outside her province.

Interviewees also pointed to the differences that exist in the security situation between the urban centers and the more rural areas of their provinces. Interviewees noted a correlation between the lack of reach of the government and the lack of security, especially for females in the more remote areas of their regions. Many of the interviewees also connected the lack of security for Afghan females to the prevalence of patriarchal traditions and customs that continue to be the dominant force in the country. Furthermore, as the Thompson Reuters poll attests, the overwhelming reason for the lack of security in the home is not because of the ongoing conflict but rather is attributed to the position of females in Afghan society.

“Our worry is not bomb blasts. It only ends our life. We worry about the mentality that society has about women who are working or studying. We are afraid about our virtue — if a woman loses her good name in society then she cannot live [here anymore]. We know when we step out of the house people follow us with their eyes from home to our workplace and back. Sometimes we are afraid they will attack our husbands and children.—NGO worker, Kandahar province.

It is clear from the quotes above that there is a link between the lack of security for females and the oppressive social values that dominate the lives of Afghan

women and girls. However, the true impact of the prevailing conservative traditions and discriminatory customary practices on women’s rights can be seen in the story of this teacher in Kandahar province:

“My husband wanted to get our daughter engaged without her consent. She said to her father and me many times: ‘I do not want to marry, I want to study’. He did not accept this. Then she killed herself, so it was our big mistake because she was forced [into something she didn’t want].”

While traditional views keep women trapped in an often lethal cycle of violence, those women who are at the forefront of advocating for change in Afghan society are considered to be most at risk by the participants of the FGDs and KIIs. Women’s rights activists especially, but also female educators, health care workers and women engaged in work regarded as the exclusive purview of men — politicians, police, etc., because these women operate in the public sphere, outside the domain of what is regarded as culturally acceptable for females in Afghan society — are seen to be more vulnerable to attacks.

A housewife from Kunduz province noted in another FGD that two women who had worked for the department of women’s affairs as well as two female lawyers had been killed “by opposition forces” recently in her province. However, some participants felt that women in their homes, who are not literate and whose lives are dominated by the dictates of the men in the family are the most vulnerable population.



Community Conversations Faryab Province.
Photo Credit : Huma Safi

The deteriorating security condition has impacted the lives of Afghan women and girls in different ways. Consequences include the loss of economic opportunities and increasing impoverishment, decreasing access to education and health services, immobility and an increase in the range and extremity of violence experienced.

The following comment from a student in a FGD in Kandahar highlights the difficulty in accessing another right, one that is articulated in the Afghan Constitution, education:

“In front of our eyes our classmate was murdered and acid was thrown on a group of our classmates because they were attending school and studying.”

Even in one of the most secure areas of the country-Bamyan, the lack of security and a corresponding rise in attacks on Afghan women and girls is starting to have an impact. According to a student in one of the FGDs conducted in the province:

“There is no feeling of security for past few months because of attacks on girls and cases of poisoning of water tankers in some schools.”

All these stories illustrate how the lack of security in the country is playing into the hands of conservative forces. Yet nowhere has the insecurity had a stronger impact than with regard to the sexual violence that Afghan women and girls are subjected to. While gender-based violence has a long history in the country, sexual violence in particular is also on the rise. While misogynis-

tic customs and practices are a major contributor to the extreme levels of violence experienced by Afghan women, another factor is the widespread culture of impunity that exists in the country.

“A girl was working with an organization. She told her family and friends that a man proposed her a few times but she rejected him. He threatened her and then after one month killed her. That man is still in the city working but her family doesn’t have any power to complain against him.”—Student, Kandahar province

The rampant culture of impunity creates an environment that discourages reporting violations, either to the authorities or institutions that have a mandate to address abuses, such as the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC). What the findings of the FGDs and KIIs show is a system in which a culture of impunity, fed by the lack of rule of law and endemic corruption, ensure that justice will not be served. From reporting a violation to seeking redress for abuses, the system consistently fails the Afghan people, but especially women and girls.

Despite widespread violence against women and girls, there is a systemic failure to address this pandemic. An ingrained culture of impunity aside, women are reluctant to report the violence they experience at the hands of males. This is due to the extreme social stigma attached, especially for victims of sexual violence, who can be cast out of their communities, jailed for adultery or considered ‘unfit’ for society.

Men and boys who commit acts of gender-based violence are rarely arrested, prosecuted or convicted as the barriers to justice remain formidable. Women face a judicial system in which the laws are written or interpreted in favor of men, as well as adjudicated by them^{*11}. As a student from Bamyan province explained,

“It’s very normal for a judge to decide the case in favor of a man, in case there is a court case registered and a man and a woman are two litigants.”

While the women of Afghanistan recognize the complexity of issues that contribute to making Afghanistan the world’s most dangerous country for females, they were unequivocal in their support to Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). However, the women condemned the role of illegal armed groups. Many women pointed out that how illegal armed groups create an increasingly unstable environment for not only the women but the whole society.

Many women say they feel safer with ANSF as the following comment from a teacher in Kunduz province attests:

“We advocate for ANSF strengthening since we count on them. If they become strong enough we can live in peace. We are afraid of illegal armed militias, and the Taliban.”

In various discussions women also illustrated a patriotic streak. Many of them were proud of the fact that the country now has its own security and military forces. Some participants had a female member in the police and they were quite proud of that. In one of the groups a woman shared how she was very proud of her daughter who was in the police. Even though being a police woman is not a traditional career choice, this woman was quite proud of her daughter since she believed that providing safety and security is an equal responsibility that both men and women should be able to serve their country and society.

In one of the FGDs a university student shared a story of an online campaign, which was launched by her and other university students. The campaign was in support of the ANSF after they fought valiantly against the insurgents in one of the attacks on a mall in Kabul. Many women and girls also contributed financially during the campaign. This example clearly illustrates Afghan women’s pride in their “National Security Forces”. The women also acknowledged that despite the fact that the forces have not yet attained the desirable standard, their presence and ability to fight and lead various combat operations was confidence infusing. Various interviewees in the KII delved into this deeply. They agreed the ANSF needs to be provided with not only more training, but also more equipment. In their opinion, the focus should now be on improving the quality of the forces and increasing their capacity- both via training and equipment.

In discussing the factors that can make a contribution to increasing security in the country, Afghan women recognize that they themselves also have much to contribute in creating a more secure environment. In both the individual interviews and focus group discussions, participants spoke of the importance of modeling peaceful behavior for the children, in order to elicit change from a conflict driven society to one predicated on peace and development.

“Everyday seven to eight teachers are assigned to check the bags and pockets of the students and others who enter the school, to check all around the school for anything suspicious, to check the water tank, to check the admin offices. Although we do all this daily, I think it would be better if one teacher would be assigned to teach the subject of ‘Peace’, two to three hours per week.” —Teacher, Kunduz province.

^{11*}An important update to the text on the erosion of women’s legal rights: In February 2014 a new article was included in the criminal procedure law in Afghanistan which will significantly increase structured violence against women and limit women’s access to justice. This article leaves it to the authority of judges to take witness testimonies of close relatives, while a significant proportion of violence happens within the home and acts such as honour killings will be virtually impossible to punish. This contradicts Afghan legal procedures and the Afghan Constitution. This among other discriminatory legislative backslides has been met with protest by civil society. (Afghan Women’s Network and Civil Society Statement on the Discriminatory Legislations Passed by the Afghan Parliament Kabul 8 February 2014).

B) AFGHAN WOMEN'S PERCEPTIONS OF CORRUPTION

Corruption is the second way that the people select for reaching their goals. Because sometimes it's the easiest way and sometimes it's the only way.
—Health care worker, Bamyan province

From both the FGDs and KIIs a disturbingly clear picture emerges of the pervasiveness of corruption in Afghanistan. Corrupt practices are seen to be the norm rather than the exception in the country. The corrosive influence of corruption has permeated every aspect of life in the country as illustrated by the experiences below:

"I know a woman who works in a school as a cleaner. The head of the school told her: 'if you do not work in my home, I will terminate you.' She told me, 'half the day I work in her home and half the day I work at the school.' " —Housewife, Balkh province

Afghan women see the rampant corruption as directly linked to the lack of security in the country. As security has deteriorated, corruption has correspondingly increased. Corruption is regarded as stemming from a lack of good governance. Good governance provides a strong foundation from which society can develop and flourish step by step. Weak governance inevitably leads to a crumbling foundation.

Weak governance in Afghanistan is seen to be both a source and a by-product of corruption. Loss of faith in the government has correspondingly increased as corrupt practices became more endemic and security deteriorated. Women in both the FGDs and KIIs spoke on the fact that they consider government to be the root of corruption in the country and did not think that anything would change in this regard.

Corruption is seen to flow from the top, setting a standard for conducting government business that has trickled down to the lowliest government worker. As a doctor from Balkh province noted,

"when a new minister comes into a ministry, all the staff automatically change because the minister will post all his family and friends in high or important positions."

A student from Bamyan province summed it up:

"Five or ten years back people were hopeful for a better government but with the passage of time they realized that nothing will change and all the government leaders are using government resources for their own benefits. So all start to follow their leaders and now there is no one to work for their country or the people."

In both the FGDs and KIIs participants pointed to the variety of ways that corruption within government is present. Perhaps the comment that best describes the view of Afghan women towards the corruption that has become embedded in the functioning of the government came from a teacher in Faryab province:

"People don't co-operate with the government since the government doesn't co-operate with the people."

In fact, corruption is now considered so widespread in Afghan society that the interviewees spoke of a "culture of corruption" in the same way that a "culture of impunity" is understood. As a health care worker from Kunduz province expressed it:

"Before it was called bribery now it is like robbery. Corruption is changed to a culture. Money is involved in everything we do. It is impossible to get work done without bribes."

In describing how this 'culture of corruption' operates, a housewife from Nangarhar province explained that,

"Whatever you do you have to pay a bribe. For example, if a student would like to change schools they have to pay a bribe. If a student would like to move to the next grade or get good marks on the university entry examination, then they have to pay a bribe."

The participants were unanimous in their agreement that corruption had increased significantly over the course of the past several years.

Women Voting in the Presidential Election ,
Mazar i Sharif. Photo Credit: Beth Wald



“Day by day corruption is increasing. The government and our society are now more corrupt than five years ago. Before we did not have to pay to enter a government office. Now you must pay to meet a government official to solve your problem. Now you must have money to solve your problems or one of your relatives must be in a high position in government.” —Health care worker, Herat province

In both the FGDs and KIIs it was recognized that the increase in corruption can be directly attributed to the conflict in the country which has increased in intensity over the course of the last several years. Participants also noted that all parties in the conflict use this to their advantage.

They believe that even the so-called ‘peace process’ is seen to be an opportunity for personal enrichment. Aid itself has become a source for the exponential increase in corruption. The country’s ability to absorb the vast flow of aid has been limited at best while donors have generally taken the approach that if enough money is thrown at an issue it will solve the problem. However, as an NGO worker from Nangarhar province commented,

“because so much money came to Afghanistan and nothing happened [here to improve the situation], that is why news about corruption is coming out.”

Many interviewees agreed that there was very little to show for the billions of dollars provided for aid and development. Often the people of Afghanistan have found themselves ‘between a rock and a hard place in the delivery of international assistance. A student from Nangarhar commented:

“Often when construction projects are given to contractors then we see the poor quality of work and embezzlement of funds in the implementation of the project.”

While reflecting on the issue of corruption, the interviewees also talked about the space available to vent these issues. The digital revolution has meant that many episodes of corruption, which would have gone unnoticed, are being shared and discussed. This has not only created pressure on erring leaders and politicians but also created more urgency to change this state of affairs.

What was also discussed was the linkage between security, aid and corruption. The story below illustrates this link:

“Six months ago we had some help for widowed women in Belcheragh district. The head of the district wanted some of this aid. At first we did not accept this but in the night his armed group gave us a warning that there would be an attack on us. So, to protect our lives we gave him some of the aid.” —NGO worker, Faryab province

The issue of international assistance is complicated by the fact that much of the aid and development money coming into the country has been delivered through different channels and as will be shown in the next section the involvement of many players and creation of parallel structures in the humanitarian and development spheres has brought a host of other problems with it, including contributing to both the systemization of corruption and deteriorating security conditions.



Women at a refugee camp in Kabul Province. Photo credit: Beth Wald

C) AFGHAN WOMEN'S PERCEPTIONS OF THE MILITARIZATION AND EFFECTIVENESS OF AID

Three themes were covered under this issue- militarization of society, effectiveness of aid and modalities of support. The participants of FGDs and KII received the issue of militarization of aid very differently. While the participants of FGDs were either not aware of the concept or needed some explanation to give their opinion, the participants of KII had a more informed opinion of the issue.

Militarization of society through illegal militias evoked strong response from most of the participants. Many of them noted that the “mechanics of militarization” are not always put in place by the state. They talked about the insurgent groups and their use of military tactics to create unsafe environment and in turn use that as a negotiating peg with the government. Many participants talked about how militant groups terrorize the local population due to the absence of effective rule of law mechanisms. One of the UN reports also pointed out that, “The militarization of society leads to an increased number of abductions of young girls and women by Taliban fighters. The exact numbers are unknown, as families have been reluctant to come forward and report cases of abductions for fear of reprisals and due to the social stigma attached to a daughter or sister kidnapped or sold for sex.”¹² Many participants themselves also pointed out this relationship between the militarization of society and security of women. They felt more vulnerable because of the militarization of society. The interviewees in various KIIs clearly differentiated between security forces that follow rule of law and illegal militias. A health care worker

in Kabul province noted,

“If the number of illegal armed men increases in society, security decreases; and if society becomes unstable, corruption increases. It’s like our body – when our bodies become weak, every kind of virus or disease can attack our bodies easily.”

Women also talked about the source of aid and implementing agencies. Many participants thought that aid delivered through military was quicker and more efficient. The reference point for “militarization of aid” for the participants of the FGDs was the PRTs. They mostly talked about their experiences (whether good or bad) with PRTs. The participants in Kabul city cited an example where the military was quick, efficient and provided assistance, where the women needed it most. In 2005, the Kabul University compound was without a boundary wall and the female students felt particularly vulnerable because of the lack of this wall. When the concern was shared with the PRT, the PRT designed, contracted and implemented this project within six months! Another participant from Bamyán said:

We don’t have any problems with the PRT (Provincial Reconstruction Teams) or ISAF. They respect all people, women, children and our village elders as well. They helped us to rebuild our schools along with a lot of other assistance. At first, some of the Mullahs were against aid from military groups but now they can see what it has done for us.
—Student, Bamyán province

¹² <http://www.un.org/events/women/2002/sit.htm>

On the other hand, many participants thought that the aid through military makes the communities more vulnerable. As a student from Nangarhar province said:

“Since the Taliban do not like foreign troops, anything that is renovated or built by them — bridge, clinic or school — they will burn or destroy them. So we the women are mainly the victims of power struggle between different groups in Afghanistan.”

In a country awash with illegal armed men, aid can become a tool through which abuses are perpetrated and governance through the barrel of the gun is reinforced. Many of the interviewees went further in pointing out the impact of the militarization of aid, directly linking it not only to the rapidly deteriorating security conditions in Afghanistan but also to the spread of corruption. As a student from Nangarhar province noted:

“Increased corruption and insecurity have direct linkages. The military issues contracts for companies. These companies take all the money and provide services that are not up to standard.”

However, even with the understanding of the correlation between a lack of security, corruption and the militarization of aid, interviewees remained divided about whether there was also a benefit to assistance projects being carried out by the military. The quotes below from two of the participants of a FGD with health care workers in Bamyan province highlight these tensions:

“We have a hospital and clinic constructed by the PRT. They help the people and have good behavior. Also, we have some aid from our national army. They take medicine to the villages [that are in remote areas]. We are happy with them.”

A large part of the issue with the militarization of aid is that assistance is used as a leverage to achieve military purposes. International troops have undertaken projects in the communities in which they are deployed as an integral part of a campaign to ‘win the hearts and minds’ of the local population as a tactic to subdue the insurgency.

Interviewees won over by the ‘hearts and minds’ campaign, particularly those living in the more secure areas of the country, talked of the advantages of the military providing assistance. The following comment is indica-

tive of the benefits experienced by communities receiving support from international forces:

“The PRT [in our area] has a free clinic. We don’t have to pay for medical care at the clinic.”
—Student, Bamyan province

However, some interviewees recognized that this kind of assistance has not been without its costs.

“Poor people don’t think about the source of aid. People were happy but the insurgents threatened them to not take assistance from foreign soldiers and after that they did not help poor people.” —
Teacher, Faryab province

It should also be noted that a small minority of the interviewees felt that the militarization offered more protection by the way of an increased presence of men in uniform. The following observation from an NGO worker in Nangarhar province was typical of this point of view:

“Militarization means more police officers and security forces. This is very good because we will have more protection.”

The other issue, which was addressed in various discussions, was the modality of aid- the participants voiced their concern that the aid was not based on the reality on ground and was not long term enough to be impactful. They also stressed the need for local ownership. While talking about what is wrong with the militarization of aid, various participants pointed out two things, which are essential to mitigate the situation- to civilianize aid and to effectively implement it. They wanted more participation from Afghans in the various phases of a project- conception, planning and execution. Giving the ownership of projects to Afghans would ensure that projects which are undertaken are based on real needs of their communities and that the aid which is meant for them, reaches them as well. Various participants also talked about the need of appropriate mechanisms at various levels to ensure stringent monitoring of various projects across the country.

To achieve and ensure sustainable change it is important to align aid with priorities of the people and to engage Afghan people to not only ensure accountability but also to increase their capacity.



Photo Credit: Ellen Jaskol

KEY FINDINGS & POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

KEY FINDINGS:

- For development initiatives to be successful and sustainable they need to be driven by Afghans and not by foreign development agencies. However, what was also echoed was that, there needs to be stringent accountability mechanisms embedded in various projects, irrespective of who runs them.
- Religious leaders are seen as agents of change and therefore key to motivate and ensure policy change. In a deeply conservative society like Afghanistan, faith leaders have power to influence the way of life and hence instrumental for change.
- The need for awareness- raising among children about the important themes and subjects. In particular to counterbalance the cycle of violence, conflict, impunity and lack of accountability for violations and abuse against women and girls. There is a need to instill values in children. “Values” are seen as an important balancing force against the root cause of conflict and dominance of security agendas.
- The need for women across various fields of involvement to engage with the public life as well as the peace process.
- Good governance is the core of sustainable solution. All public institutions are to serve the public with respect and it is their duty to provide safety, security and stability as well as growth and opportunity to the citizens irrespective of their gender or creed.
- The need for enhancement and strengthening of Army and Police to fulfill the most basic and fundamental need of security, irrespective of whether they

live in a city or a village. A strong army and police, working for the people which can instill rule of law among the people and its own institutions.

- People should be engaged to build trust. Monitoring mechanisms as well as developing various platforms for feedback gives people ownership of projects and that in turn builds trust between people and government.
- Lead by example. The fight against corruption can only be won if the leadership is not tainted. Without removing corrupt leaders any initiative would be hollow.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

To the International Community:

- Include women in all discussions and initiatives with regard to the peace and reconciliation processes and facilitate and ensure participation of women (both government and civil society) at international conferences and meetings concerning the future of Afghanistan;
- Tie financial and technical support to women’s meaningful participation in the processes, particularly in the provinces;
- Commit to ensuring that women’s rights are a non-negotiable part of any international dialogue on peace, as well as advocate to the Afghan government to commit to the same;



Sakina Paion conducting a “key informant interview” as part of the Community Conversations. Photo Credit: Huma Safi

- Continue to assist the government of Afghanistan in implementing its commitments to gender equality policies and laws, and in particular, the organs of the Elimination of Violence Against Women Bill (EVAW). Continue providing capacity building and technical assistance to the justice and security sectors in prevention of violence and abuse of women and girls; and hold them accountable;
- Continue to encourage, fund and build the capacity of institutions and organizations that monitor and evaluate the progress of women’s rights and gender empowerment in the country;
- Step back and ensure that Afghan women are driving the agenda for women’s rights and empowerment in Afghanistan, including during the transition process. Their voices must take the lead role in defining their legal, policy and social concerns and priorities;
- Continue to provide support especially long-term programs that encourage Afghan women to enter and remain, in public and political careers;
- De-link military engagement with the humanitarian and development spheres and channel aid and development projects through non-military, transparent and accountable channels;
- Support programs that sensitize men and boys to the rights of women and girls.

To the Afghan government:

- Commit to including women’s meaningful and full participation at the negotiation table and in decision-making with regard to the peace, reintegration and reconciliation processes, including at the provincial, national and international levels and in line with constitutional guarantees;
- Commit to refrain from supporting proposed laws and policies that violate the Afghanistan Constitution and their international obligations and commitments with regard to women’s rights.
- Commit to ensuring that women’s rights are a non-negotiable part of any discussions and policies on peace;
- Ensure that “the security agenda” does not trump the enforcement of laws and mechanisms for accountability;
- Commit to providing security to women in public and political positions who face intimidation, harassment and violence because of their work;
- Continue to implement government commitments to gender equality policies and laws, and in particular, the organs of the Elimination of Violence Against Women Bill (EVAW);
- Commit to formally and regularly report on the progress of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security in the country.

WRN women at a Steering
Committee Meeting in Kabul,
Afghanistan April 2013
Photo Credit: Kalpana Biswas



To the Civil Society:


- Male civil society actors in Afghanistan should support Afghan women in their struggles for basic rights. It is important that male civil society actors don't act as fence — sitters but join their forces with women activists;
- Women across Afghanistan need to come together in this struggle. Therefore there is a crucial need to connect women from urban areas to women in rural areas. Civil society plays an important role in bringing women from different walks of life together;
- There is a large gap between the government and the “governed”. The civil society needs to act as a conduit between the two and facilitate the conversation between the two;
- Women leaders need to be projected as role models not only for women's rights, but also as role models in professional life. Examples of women excelling as managers, doctors, scientists etc...need to be showcased;
- Design and implement programs for empowering women not only in the fields of gender sensitization but also in other fields which are male dominated sectors such as economy, security and judiciary;
- Advocate for long-term meaningful programs rather than short-term small projects with no impact. In order to have a strong impact and noticeable change various programs need to run through their life cycle. In most cases programs which are run for more than two years have created more impact than short term projects;
- Become a template for transparency and accountability. Civil society can lead the fight on corruption by introducing and implementing various standards on transparency and accountability;
- Become more responsive and collaborative. Collaboration by civil society can help create a very strong front and would help in fighting and challenging the status quo;
- Civil society should not only criticize the government, but also provide constructive suggestions to improve the design and implementation of various programs.



Photo Credit: Ellen Jaksol

CONCLUSION

At a time when the international community plans to withdraw their military missions from Afghanistan, transferring the responsibility of security to the Afghan National Security Forces, it is important that women's rights are a non-negotiable part of the transition. After investing a decade into initiatives that strengthened women's position politically, economically and socially, the Afghan government as well as the international community need to ensure that the progress remains secure and supported.



While talking to women from various provinces, it became clear that many of them recognized and acknowledged the progress of the past decade, however, they also shared their concern that much more effort is needed to advance Afghan society, especially women's rights. The fear exists among women of a complete pull out and the potential fear of handing power over to insurgents and warlords.

Afghan women were of the view that progress would leap frog if a secure and safe environment is provided in the country. They also “felt” safer with a much stronger Afghan National Security Force, which can counter attacks by illegal armed groups. The women were clearly against the illegal armed groups which militarizes the society rather than safeguarding its interests.

There is a common belief that corruption does not affect women's lives in Afghanistan since women are mostly ‘at home’. However, the women in various FGDs and KIIs were quick to point out how corruption directly impacts their daily lives by making them disadvantaged during various direct and indirect interactions, either with the government or its machinery. Women also talked about how accountability and transparency in aid would make various projects more robust and effective — hence

bringing change to their lives and the lives of those in their communities.

What was unanimously echoed was that during the transition period, women should be directly involved in any negotiations about the future of Afghanistan. Furthermore, that aid should be long-term, rooted in local needs and transparent to in order to be effective.

The intention behind this report was to give agency and voice to the millions of women living in Afghanistan who are silently taking the brunt of the continuous insecurity around them and the impact of corruption and militarization on their daily lives. The intention of this report was twofold: first, to be a conduit between Afghan women and the rest of the world and to echo their concerns on topics which are generally considered male-dominated- security and militarization; second, to inform decisions.

The members of the Women's Regional Network hope this compilation of women's perspectives serves as an impetus for other Afghan-serving organizations to raise awareness and enhance advocacy efforts to bring about meaningful change in public policy, ultimately to improve women's lives, allowing women to reach their full potential as equal participants in Afghan society.

APPENDICES

I. QUESTIONNAIRES

Focus Group Discussion Questions:

Security

- How do you understand security? How secure do you feel?
- Do you feel more secure after current peace talks? If not, what makes you feel insecure?
- What does feeling secure means for girls/women?
- What category of women and girls are more vulnerable?
- Where do you feel most secure?
- What is the impact of an insecure environment on women and girl's lives?
- What kinds of strategies have the people, especially women, developed to cope with insecurities and provide themselves with better security?
- Has anyone in your family been affected by violence in the last three years how he/she was affected and what was the outcome?

Corruption

- How you define corruption? Please provide a detailed definition.
- How wide spread and routine is corruption? What forms does it take?
- Do you think there is more corruption at the provincial, central or international level?
- Is the corruption systematic? Why do you think there is so much corruption?
- Is there more corruption in conflict-affected areas?
- Is society and government more corrupt than 5-10 years before? Why?
- Does corruption have a different impact on girls/women? Is it more difficult for women in a corrupt society? Are women (officials /leaders) less corrupt?
- Have you, or do you know of, any strategies to reduce corruption? Can women play a role in checking corruption-related practices?
- Please provide examples of when you have had to pay a bribe. When did it happen, how much did you pay? What were the circumstances and what was the outcome?

Militarization

- What is your understanding of militarization?
- Aspects of militarization encountered, including: the level of physical presence of armed persons; human rights violations linked to the military; glorification of military heroes.
- How are women/girls impacted by militarization?
- What kind of strategies have people, especially women, developed to deal with militarization and its impact?
- What is the impact of militarization on security and corruption? Do you see a linkage?
- Do you think there is a linkage between militarization, insecurity and corruption?

Violations of human rights and Access to Justice

- Have you or anyone you know experienced any of these human rights violations in the context of militarization and corruption? What were the violations?
- Did you report any of these violations? What were the actions taken? What were the remedies available to address these violations?

Key Informant Interview Questions:

Current Efforts

- Can you please describe for us the efforts that your organization or yourself making to support women peace and security, anti corruption and militarization of aid in Afghanistan both inside and outside of the country? What specific activities you have carried in these areas so far?
- What influenced your organization or yourself to focus on women peace security? (*Was it a call for assistance from the government, civil society, an organizational focus on women, peace and security, etc?*)
- What kind of activity you are focusing on (research, advocacy, awareness or training)?

General Opinion

- Please provide a list of women challenges with regard to peace and security, corruption and militarization of aid? How are these impacting women daily life?

Future Efforts

- What kind of intervention is needed to address women challenge you mentioned above?
- Are you familiar with peace and transition processes? How do you think these programs are impacting women's lives?
- What other efforts or programs would you recommend be implemented to encourage women and female students participate in peace process? *Please provide details about the program and who you believe should implement it.*

II. BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. "A Just Peace? The Legacy of War for the Women of Afghanistan," ActionAid, 2011.
2. A Place at the Table. Safeguarding Women's Rights in Afghanistan," Oxfam Briefing Paper, 2011.
3. "Afghanistan in 2011 - A Survey of the Afghan People," Asia Foundation, 2011.
4. "Afghanistan in Transition: Looking Beyond 2014. Volume 1: Overview," The World Bank, 2012.
5. "Afghan Women after the Taliban: Will History Repeat Itself?" Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization, 2012.
6. "The Challenge of Becoming Invisible. Understanding Women's Security in Afghanistan", Heinrich Boll Foundation Advocacy Paper, 2012.
7. "The National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA)": The Government's Main Vehicle for Implementing Policies and Commitments to Advance the Status of Women. 2007-2017.
8. "UN SCR 1325 Implementation in Afghanistan," Afghan Women's Network, 2011.
9. "Women and Transition in Afghanistan, Care International Policy Brief, 2012.

Founded in 2011, the Women's Regional Network (WRN) is a network of individual women civil society leaders from Afghanistan, Pakistan and India working together to strengthen women's rights and security. WRN is animated by a vision of women working collaboratively within and across borders to ensure human rights, equitable development and the full participation of women in building a just peace. At its launch, members of the Network identified three interlinked areas of concern—security, militarization and extremism, and corruption—as a priority for all three countries.

CHARITABLE DONATIONS CAN BE MADE TO:

The Women's Regional Network
c/o The Colorado Non-Profit Development Center,
789 Sherman Street, Suite 250 Denver Colorado, U.S.A. 80203
OR donate online at www.womensregionalnetwork.org

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Email infowrn@gmail.com

 www.facebook.com/WomensRegionalNetwork

 [@WRNnews](https://twitter.com/WRNnews)

www.womensregionalnetwork.org



WOMEN'S REGIONAL NETWORK
AFGHANISTAN • PAKISTAN • INDIA